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NEWS RELEASE

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COEUR D'ALENE COIN DEALER GETS 37 YEARS ON DRUG & GUN CHARGES

A federal judge yesterday ordered Coeur d'Alene coin dealer Robert "BJ" Mertens, 47, to spend 37 years in prison for drug trafficking, money laundering and possession of illegal guns, U.S. Attorney Tom Moss announced.

Mertens was also ordered to serve 5 years supervised release following his incarceration, get drug and mental health counseling and pay a special assessment of \$3500. In addition, the judge signed an order directing Mertens to pay judgements of \$3.6 million and turn over cash and property gleaned

from his drug business.

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Mertens was convicted in September on one count of conspiracy to distribute cocaine and marijuana, seven counts of distribution of cocaine and marijuana, one count of using the telephone to distribute controlled substances, three counts of being a felon in possession of firearms, one count of brandishing a firearm during a drug trafficking crime, and 23 counts of money laundering.

The jury found that over a period of eight years, Mertens sold more than 6,000 grams of crack cocaine and more than 86,000 grams of marijuana.

Mertens has owned and operated Northwest Coin and Jewelry, 501 Appleway, Coeur d'Alene, since 1989. The jury found that from at least 1995 until his arrest in 2003, Mertens regularly sold drugs from his business, his residences in Coeur d'Alene and Sandpoint, the Sagle Flea Market and other locations. While Mertens usually received cash, the jury found that he sometimes exchanged drugs for guns or jewelry, and used coins, jewelry and guns as well as cash to buy the drugs that he later sold for a profit. According to testimony at trial, Mertens' drug transactions included sales to an undercover police officer and to a confidential informant.

The jury also found that Mertens illegally possessed at least 26 firearms, and brandished one of them during a drug deal. They also found that Mertens was guilty of laundering the proceeds of his drug sales through the coin business, and issuing false receipts purporting to be for the purchase of coins, gold and silver.

Moss commended the "lengthy and difficult" investigation by the Idaho State Police (ISP), the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) and the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) Criminal Investigation Division. He also thanked the Kootenai County Drug Task Force, the Bonner County Sundance Drug Task Force, the Kootenai and Bonner County Sheriff's Offices and the Coeur d'Alene Police Department for their assistance on the case.

“BJ Mertens was both a major drug dealer and a dangerous man,” Moss said. “but thanks to all of these wonderful people he no longer threatens the community. That’s law enforcement at its finest.”

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“Our common goal is to get drugs off the street,” said ISP Captain Clark Rollins. “This case just goes to show that good things happen when we work together.”

“With the successful conclusion of the Mertens investigation and prosecution, the law enforcement community has had a huge impact on reducing violent crime,” said Special Agent in Charge Kelvin N. Crenshaw, ATF Seattle Field Division.

“Narcotics traffickers in all 50 states should sit up and take notice of what happened today,” said Douglas A Bricker, IRS Special Agent in Charge for Idaho, Oregon and Hawaii. “Not only must Mr. Mertens forfeit decades of personal freedom, he will also forfeit most, if not all, of his ill-gotten gains. IRS special agents are committed to taking the profit out of crime, and that’s what happened here.”

Three co-defendants in the case pled guilty prior to Mertens’ trial. Frederick Lee “Freeze” Palm, 34, of Spokane admitted that he had sold seven grams of cocaine to Mertens. Barnabas Eugene Douglas, 28, also of Spokane, pled guilty to selling an ounce of cocaine to an undercover agent. A third Spokane man, Calvin L. Rogers, 29, admitted accompanying Douglas during a drug sale and not reporting his knowledge of the felony.
